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ABSTRACT

Marshall McLuhan's thesis that the "media is the message" can be criticized from two perspectives: that communication can be divided into content and media, and that media is the element that most affects human consciousness. The weight of numerous illustrations are to the contrary. Furthermore, the assertion is so broad that there is no way to prove its validity. To focus on a single variable (media) to explain the state of human consciousness ignores the multitude of other variables that are at work. McLuhan's second error is one of omission. He fails to understand the gravity of language in affecting communications. By comparison, the effects of media are only trivial. (EMH)

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Partly Through the Rear-View Mirror

by Lewis Miller

A paper for the National Association of Educational Broadcasters' Convention, Washington, November, 1975

Part of the purpose of this paper, as the title suggests, is to look back a bit, to look at the central 'message' of McLuhan through the 'medium' of print---the medium through which we have received most of McLuhan's 'messages'.

What, in McLuhan's name, are we doing here anyway?---Here we are, engaged in the kind of conference activity that McLuhan has said to be irrelevant, looking at him, at least partly, through 'rear-view mirrors', trying to be logical in a linear way, trying to limit ourselves to statements that can be supported empirically---not simply 'probing'. It would appear that somebody hasn't got the message---the McLuhan message.

I suppose we can't forget the statements made by Tom Wolfe and George Elliott ten years ago. "What if he's right?" asked Wolfe, to which Elliott added a kind of contrary, "if he is wrong, it matters."[1] Here, today, in any case, since in some sense we are extensions of the man, McLuhan is the medium is the message.

In this paper I shall touch mainly, and all too briefly, on the following two topics: first, that despite McLuhan's statements to the contrary, his "medium is the message" doctrine is deterministic, not unlike the form of the determinism of Marxism, and, being a metaphysical doctrine, is therefore beyond the possibility of empirical

support; and, secondly, I shall point to the category mistake made by McLuhan in his assumption that the medium of language is not essentially different from electric media of communications.

This criticism will clear the way for re-asserting the view (without accepting the charge of being what McLuhan has termed a "technological idiot") that an important distinction may be drawn between the 'content' ('message', if you like) and the medium used to bear or transmit that content. It has to be noted that McLuhan is not always consistent about this distinction. He does allow, for example, that in the famous Nixon-Kennedy TV debate, the 'content' of the Kennedy message was influential in winning support over Nixon.[2] Generally, though, McLuhan puts it that the 'process' of the medium is more important than the 'content'. This is of course the import of the phrase, "the medium is the message". But his simply saying so by no means makes it so. His very inconsistency is at least suggestive of uncertainty, and the social implications of his general opinion are such that we can hardly accept them without question. We would do well to heed the message so eloquently delivered to us yesterday by Mr. Bagdikian in his keynote address to this convention. We had better be far more concerned than we have been so far about the 'contents' of our media.

I should like to have had time to speak also about some of the merits of McLuhan, rather than only a couple of demerits. I share his view, for example, that far too many educators tend to look primarily through 'rear-view mirrors', thereby impeding awareness of the present and the possible future. I should like, too, on the demerit side, to have said something about the widespread view that electronic media are

crowding out print, which there is good reason to doubt. Perhaps these and other matters may be raised in our discussion.

A fundamental weakness of deterministic theories such as those of Marx, Freud, McLuhan and others, is that they assume Godhead, asserting far more than anyone is able to test. McLuhan would of course challenge being placed in this group, since he does make claims to using an empirical approach, in several instances does reject Marxism, and specifically says that he is not a determinist.

> "Far from being deterministic..." he writes in The Gutenberg Galaxy, "the present study will, it is hoped, elucidate a principal factor in social change which may lead to a genuine increase of human autonomy."[3]

In the same context he also says, rather brashly, that his thesis supplements the work of Peter Drucker by adding the "one thing we do not know" to help to explain the "technological revolution". Then, more modestly, he does allow that "even so, there may well prove to be some other things!"---He should have kept that qualification in mind.

It is fairly easy to cull out statements from his writings that demonstrate determinism. Consider the following opening piece of prose from The Medium is the Massage:

> "The medium, or process of our time--electric technology--is reshaping and restructuring patterns of social interdependence and every aspect of our personal life. It is forcing us to reconsider and evaluate practically every thought, every action, and every institution formerly taken for granted."[4]

We are all, he would say, within the "power" of the 'process' (not of the 'contents') of the media of electric technology. In response to his own question as to why, before him, "the effects of media, whether speech, writing, photography or radio (have) been overlooked by social observers

through the past 3,500 years of the Western world?", he responds:

> "The answer to that question...is in the power of the media themselves to impose their own assumptions upon our modes of perception. Our media have always constituted the parameters and the framework for the objectives of our Western world."[5]

While he also suggests, again inconsistently, that there is no inevitability in the process, he provides no directions for standing outside it, unless, perhaps, we take up the following odd suggestion:

> "I think we would do ourselves a considerable kindness if we closed down TV operations for a few years. If TV was simply eliminated from the United States scene, it would be a very good thing."[6]

The suggestion is not, that is, that we should alter the 'contents' of the medium, but rather that we should shut if off entirely. If anything, this suggestion would seem to reinforce the determinism of his doctrine.

This is neither to compliment nor to disparage McLuhan by putting him in bed with Marx and other determinists, but rather to indicate how similar in <u>form</u>, and how faulty, are their central theses. There is the same kind of tunnel-vision, seizing on one main condition to the neglect of many other variables, the same kind of prophetic generalization, and there is no attempt to explore that generalization in a wide variety of contexts to see if it really works---of course such a universal generalization is impossible to explore anyway.

Nor is it my intention to use the label "determinism" as a derogatory term, as if the labelling of a theory in this way is sufficient to condemn it. For all I know, we might be completely 'determined' by a finite or an infinite number of factors in our environments. My purpose, again, is simply to point out that McLuhan's doctrine lays itself open to many of the criticisms that can be made against similar

metaphysical theories. The simple question, "How can he possibly know?", is sufficient to begin to show up the weakness. Let's recognize, then, the major premiss of McLuhanism for what it is: a metaphysical premiss that is beyond the possibility of even modest empirical support.

No doubt most of us, at least those of us in the Western world, are considerably influenced by the environment of electric technology. So, too, as McLuhan readily acknowledges, we are and have been influenced by print and other media. In The Gutenberg Galaxy and Understanding Media, for example, he lists over twenty "extensions of man", some of which, by the way, are not at all electric or electronic (e.g. clothing, the bicycle, games, housing, etc.), but yet he focusses on electric media as our principal conditioners, to the neglect of the others. Some media, such as drama, ballet, music, and art per se, are given only cursory attention. And, so far as I know, he does not give serious attention to the work of Freud, who similarly concentrated in a tunnel-vision sort of way on what he termed the basic "instincts" of "sex" and "aggression", which simply cannot be ignored (again we are reminded of Mr. Bagdikian's address, with his references to the content of much print and television today). Whether or not, then, electric media are the principal conditioners of our environment is not a matter that can simply be decided by fiat, by a McLuhan probe.

Professor George Gordon, in his recent book, Communications and Media, is of interest both in the consideration of McLuhan's determinism as well as his sociological analysis. He is critical of those analysts who, following the lead of McLuhan,

> "...have tried to mysticize technology, to turn man's techniques and instruments into demi-gods, implying that our devices live a life of their own that dictates not only their 'messages' (or content) but the nature of the civilizations they were designed to serve."[7]

This viewpoint is wrong, writes Gordon, and he goes on to cite the work of Jacques Ellul, the French sociologist, who, he feels, has provided a far more satisfactory analysis.[8] The difficulty with the McLuhan approach, Gordon writes, is that it misinterprets "the essential functions of 'techniques' themselves." He continues:

> "Nor do they take into account the fact that technology (or many technologies) have been conditions of man's social development throughout all of recorded history. That they are competent to take pencil in hand (or peck at a typewriter) and frame their arguments in words means that in the deeps of their beings and acts of thinking and feeling, they are themselves as well immersed in the medium of various technologies as a fish is in water."[9]

Gordon's point, then, following Ellul, is that man's ability to invent and employ techniques or technologies is more fundamental than the inventing and employing of specific technologies, such as print and electronic media.

A similar kind of argument (although more fundamental, I believe) may be made when one considers language. This is to introduce my second main point, that the "medium is the message" doctrine is guilty of a category mistake in McLuhan's assuming that language is at the same category-level as the media that permit us to transmit that language. In his concentration on the media of print and electric technology he tends to overlook the more basic activity of communication, that is, language itself. This is most clearly seen in his chapter, "The Spoken Word", in Understanding Media, when he refers to "speech" as the "technical extension of consciousness", and writes that "the human voice may be

compared to the radio transmitter...." Then, under the influence of Bergson, he continues in the following mystical manner:

> "Electricity points the way to an extension of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of men....The next logical step would seem to be, not to translate, but to by-pass languages in favor of a general cosmic consciousness which might be very like the collective unconscious dreamt of by Bergson. The condition of 'weightlessness', that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace."[10]

Surely, he's putting us on!---He has said that fish are unaware of the medium in which they swim, and, if he's serious, it appears that, paradoxically, he, too, is not really aware of the first-order nature of the medium of language which he so prolifically transcribes to the second-order medium of the printed page, or utters (or, as he often says, "outers") orally via second-order media of electric technology.

He had been influenced by the writings of Benjamin Whorf, who had concluded that the structure of a person's particular language shapes or conditions his perception and understanding of 'reality'. McLuhan mentions, for example, that the Eskimo has a number of words for 'snow', denoting the different conditions of snow; and thus the Eskimo child, conditioned by his language, grows up experiencing a richer world of snowy conditions than most of us do. Some linguists, notably Noam Chomsky, have gone beyond this thesis, to maintain that underlying the particular grammars of the separate languages of man is a "universal grammar", the study of which is no less than the "study of the nature of human intellectual capacities."[11] Whether or not one accepts Chomsky's thesis, it is sufficient to support the following

argument by Jonathan Miller in his book, McLuhan:

> ".. language is not just an optional appendage of the human mind, but a constituent feature of its ongoing activity. Language in fact bears the same relationship to the concept of mind that legislation bears to the concept of parliament: it is a competence forever bodying itself forth in a series of concrete performances.
>
> Seeing language in this way, as a relationship between competence and performance, one can begin to appreciate that the substance through which language is expressed is a matter of relative indifference."[12]

I think Miller overstates his case a bit. After all, there does seem to be something to be said for McLuhan's view, following Harold Innis, that the mode of communications--not simply electronic or print communications--is significant in the conditioning of man. Still, the point may be drawn that the 'message'--that which man wants to communicate--is at a first-order level as compared with the second-order medium that conveys the 'message'. If one were to overstate this, in the manner of McLuhan--which I shall not do--one would have to say, "the medium is not the message."

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